U.S. Underrated Red ICBM Growth

By George C. Wilson
Washington Post Staff Writer

The United States last year underestimated the future production of Soviet intercontinental ballistic missiles, Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara said yesterday in Austin, Tex., after meeting with President Johnson.

But McNamara stressed that the U.S. offensive missile force was built big enough to cover such underestimation and would continue to have a 3 or 4 to 1 edge over the Soviet force.

The Defense Secretary said the 1965 national intelligence estimate of future Soviet missile strength was proving to be accurate for 1966, still looked good for mid-1867 but not for mid-1968.

"Evidence now suggests that the Soviets in mid-1968 will have more ICBMs than were predicted for that time period by intelligence estimates in 1965," McNamara said.

"But we had more than anticipated this development in our planning," he added. "This new intelligence estimate, therefore, has no basic impact on our offensive strategic force requirements."

McNamara then made these three points, declaring "it is vital" that they "are clearly understood by the American public:

- "Even if the new intelligence estimated for mid-1968 proves accurate, the United States, without taking any actions beyond those already planned, will continue to have a substantial quantitative and qualitative superiority over the Soviet Union in ICBMs at that time.
- "The United States has as many ICBMs today as the latest national intelligence estimate gives the Soviet Union several years hence.
- "Our strategic offensive forces have today and will continue to have in the future the capability of absorbing a deliberate first strike and retaliating with sufficient strength to inflict unacceptable damage upon the aggressor or any combination of aggressors."

The United States has a force of about 1000 ICBMs backed up by a fleet of 41 Polaris submarines, each carrying 16 nuclear-tipped missiles. Not all the ICBMs are ready to fire. The plan is to have a total ICBM force of 1000 Minutemen and 54 Titan 2s.

Russia has less than 300 ICBMs now. The worrisome new factor, according to intelligence officials, is that the Soviets are increasing their ICBM production rate. Quantity production has always proved a big obstacle to Russia in the past, not only in missiles but in warplanes as well.

Despite McNamara's assurances that the U.S. offensive missile force will stay well ahead of Russia's, his latest disclosure about Russian missile progress cannot help but escalate the strategic balance debate.